

*Viewpoints*  
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# The U.S. Administration's Policy in Iraq

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Iraq has slipped in the priority of the U.S. administration given the tumultuous events in the region, but this is not justifiable in the long run.

Iraq's security is deteriorating as violence intensifies, and thousands of civilians have been killed or injured since the beginning of this year. Nouri al-Maliki is driving the country into a new style of authoritarianism.

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Iraq has fallen down the ladder of main concerns for the U.S. administration during the last few months. The civil war in Syria, the military coup d'état in Egypt, and the efforts to resume the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have all pushed Iraq down President Barack Obama's list of priorities. This is a mistake because Iraq can be an important factor in all of those three burning issues facing the administration, and the first two in particular. Furthermore, while the administration is waiting for the new President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, to settle down before fully gauging his intentions, Iraq can be pivotal in building a bridge to improve the West's relations with Iran.<sup>i</sup> Although Iraq's Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, has solid relations with Iran and there is strong Iranian influence both politically and economically in Iraq, it would be a mistake to think of Iraq as simply a pawn of Iran.

As all these dramatic events are taking place in the region, the security situation in Iraq continues to deteriorate. Since the beginning of 2013, about 4,000 people have been killed and more than 10,000 injured, mostly civilians, in violent incidents across Iraq.<sup>ii</sup> This is the highest level of violence since 2008, raising fears of renewed sectarian conflict between the Sunnis and the Shi'as. The Iraqi security services and the government are failing to stop the bloodshed, which is becoming more reminiscent of the civil war that raged between 2005 and 2007. Meanwhile, Iraq's oil exports are stagnating against the optimistic expectation of reaching 3.5 million barrels per day, with Iraq's output of crude oil averaging 2.9 million barrels per day, similar to last year. While Iraq is sitting on more than 140 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, the country's wealth is not being properly distributed and the infrastructure is still in an abysmal condition. Corruption is pervasive in all sectors of Iraq's economy, and all attempts to curtail its spread are failing because so much of it is tolerated at the highest levels. Iraq never developed into the economic dynamo that the United States hoped for following the 2003 invasion. In the interim, the Kurds are continuing to develop their oil fields, taking advantage of the mayhem prevailing in the region and the lack of any constructive negotiations with Baghdad. Strengthening their relations with the Turks and supporting their Kurdish brethren in Syria (and opening their borders to thousands of Kurdish refugees) are giving Kurdistan a strong hand in the regional game of politics and economics.

There are more than just signals that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is navigating Iraq to a new system of authoritarianism. In late August, Iraq's highest court cleared the way for al-Maliki to run for a third term in next year's elections by declaring that a law previously passed in parliament to prevent al-Maliki's continued domination was unconstitutional. Throughout his seven-year tenure as prime minister, al-Maliki "has implemented a divide and conquer strategy that has neutered any credible Sunni Arab leadership."<sup>iii</sup> Evidence is mounting that al-Maliki is persistent in his "attempts to centralize power in his own hands and those of his allies."<sup>iv</sup> The combination of a deteriorating sectarian conflict where hundreds of innocent civilians are the target of daily terrorist attacks – the majority of which are efficiently executed by a resurgent al-Qaeda – together with a new style of authoritarianism and prevalent corruption, all do not augur well for the country or for U.S. policy in the region.

There is no doubt that the civil war in Syria has negatively impacted the sectarian relations in Iraq. All reports indicate that al-Qaeda is strengthening and succeeding in its recruitment of jihadists from both countries, which is reflected in the serious increase in suicide bombings of Shi'i civilian targets and has already led to a re-arming of Shi'i militias in response. There are reports of Iraqi Shi'as volunteering to fight on behalf of the Bashar al-Assad regime inside Syria and Iraqi Sunnis traveling to Syria to fight for the opposition. The U.S. administration has failed to exert enough pressure on Iraq to prevent the transfer of men and arms (mostly from Iran) to Syria. Time and again, the Iraqi government has refused U.S. requests to put a halt to Iranian cargo flights to Syria carrying tons of weapons, insisting that these planes are carrying only humanitarian aid. Intriguingly, after decades of intense acrimony between the two factions of the Ba'ath party in Iraq and Syria, a new triangle of Iran, Syria, and Iraq has developed, aggravating the old sectarian divides in Iraq.<sup>v</sup>

Secretary of State John Kerry attempted to convince the Iraqi leadership during a visit to Baghdad in March 2013 to stop allowing the funneling of arms and fighters from Iran to Syria through Iraq. Iraq's support to Syria is significant politically, militarily, financially, and economically in particular given the severe sanctions imposed on Assad's regime. It should be noted that Kerry's visit came after four years without a U.S. secretary of state visiting Iraq, a fact that in itself indicates how once U.S. troops left Iraq at the end of 2011, the U.S. administration shifted its focus away from Iraq. In fact, most of the visits by U.S. diplomats and politicians since the end of 2011 have concentrated on the situation in Syria, and supposedly to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to Iraq's security.

Leaving Iraq to follow its current path and be propelled into another civil war will prove disastrous: the sectarian strife will continue to deteriorate, ensuring that extremists will gain the upper hand and leading to further economic deterioration that forces many young talented people to leave the country for more opportunities, security, and better infrastructure elsewhere. This brain drain that began in 2003 and gained momentum during the civil war of 2005-2007 has deprived the country of many professionals and impoverished its civil service. It will most likely continue, given the lack of security and the pervasiveness of corruption coupled with a general indifference on the part of the United States.

Although we may not witness a civil war on the scale of 2005, the worsening security situation could certainly deprive the country of any serious investments. This increase in sectarian violence will surely pave the way for more authoritarianism and ensure that al-Maliki and his inner clique will continue to control the country. Some have called for al-Maliki to go,<sup>vi</sup> but this is not a realistic solution at this point: al-Maliki is very entrenched and the effort has to focus on putting a halt to these civilian massacres by engaging all sides.

There are lines connecting all these issues in the region. A weak Iraq, lacking security and prosperity will only exacerbate these crises. Given the recent events in Egypt, the United States is in even more need of a stable, reliable, democratic, and prosperous ally. The United States should engage Iraq's neighbors in a serious attempt to at least reduce the violence. Iraq's relations with other Arab Gulf countries are being hampered by its political stance that is precluding any serious economic cooperation. It is understandable why Iraq has slipped in the priority of the administration given the tumultuous events in the rest of the region, but this is not justifiable in the long run. U.S. relations with Iraq cannot be based simply on arms sales and

“consultations” from time to time without making any serious impact. The United States still could and should put more pressure on al-Maliki to play a constructive role in the region and to prevent Iraq from sliding into a new type of authoritarianism.



*The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.*

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<sup>i</sup> See for example: Michael Gordon, “Iran is said to Want Direct Talks with U.S. on Nuclear Program,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) reports. According to UNAMI, 2012 had the highest casualty rate since 2009 with 3,238 civilians killed and more than 10,000 injured. For a breakdown of casualties, see Agence France-Presse Table on violence in:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/ccc?key=0Aia6y6NymliRdEZESktBSWVqNWM1dkZOSGNIVmtFZEE#gid=8>

<sup>iii</sup> International Crisis group, “Make or Break: Iraq’s Sunnis and the State,” *Middle East Report*, No. 144, August 14, 2013.

<sup>iv</sup> Toby Dodge, “State and Society in Iraq Ten years after Regime Change: the Rise of a New Authoritarianism,” *International Affairs*, vol. 89, issue 2, March 2013.

<sup>v</sup> Michael S. Schmidt and Yasir Ghazi, “Iraqi Leader Backs Syria, with a Nudge from Iran,” *The New York Times*, August 12, 2013.

<sup>vi</sup> Nussasabah Younis, “Why Maliki Must Go,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 2013.

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